

UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE (ACQUISITION AND TECHNOLOGY) SETS NEW STANDARDS FOR THE DEFENSE ACQUISITION WORKFORCE

Dr. Jacques S. Gansler, Under Secretary of Defense (Acquisition and Technology) (USD(A&T)), has issued a broad new policy requiring all Defense acquisition personnel to engage in the equivalent of 80 hours of continuous learning activity every two years. The policy applies to approximately 100,000 civilian and military members of the Defense acquisition workforce, ranging from scientific and technical personnel to contracting specialists.

Since 1991, when the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA) was passed by Congress, the DoD acquisition workforce has enjoyed one of the most comprehensive career development programs in the federal government. Designed to ensure that acquisition personnel have the knowledge and skills necessary to perform effectively in multiple defense acquisition specialties, the DAWIA directed the Department to take certain actions to promote professionalism of its acquisition workforce.

In implementing DAWIA, DoD established a process called the "Certification Program" through which acquisition personnel are recognized as having achieved professional status by meeting the professional standards of education, training and experience established for a career level (I, II or III) in any of the 11 acquisition career fields. The 11 career fields are: Program Management; Communications-Computer Systems; Contracting, including Construction; Purchasing; Industrial/Contract Property Management; Systems Planning, Research, Development and Engineering; Test and Evaluation; Manufacturing, Production and Quality Assurance; Acquisition Logistics; Business, Cost Estimating and Financial Management; and Auditing.

The certification standards include successful completion of mandatory training courses addressing the competencies required to perform acquisition functions in these career fields at each of the three levels. Although the mandatory acquisition training courses are updated on a regular basis, DoD acquisition policy officials became concerned that the rapid pace of change and reengineering was outstripping employees' ability to stay abreast of acquisition reforms and new business practices. Of particular concern were acquisition specialists who had completed mandatory certification training in prior years, but had not attended additional training in the interim.

The USD(A&T) subsequently directed the development of a comprehensive continuous learning policy to help acquisition personnel to stay current, and to meet performance expectations in a rapidly evolving work environment. Titled "Reform Through Learning: USD(A&T) Policy on Continuous Learning for the Defense Acquisition Workforce," the resulting document was developed with the participation of some 50 DoD components, including the military services and defense agencies, and is among the most far-reaching and comprehensive frameworks for employee development and lifelong learning in the federal sector.

Although focused principally on those employees who have completed certification requirements for the positions they hold, the policy applies to all members of the acquisition workforce. All personnel are required annually to assess their needs for training and development, and prepare an Individual Development Plan in consultation with their supervisors. Acquisition personnel who have not yet been certified for the positions they hold are required to focus their development plan on completing the mandatory education and training requirements, and on participation in on-the-job learning activities to practice and broaden their skills.

Acquisition personnel who have achieved certification for the positions they hold are required to engage in "continuous learning" activities, earning a minimum of 80 points every two years. Designed to respond to the USD(A&T)'s call for "more systems thinkers and good managers," the policy provides a systematic approach to employee development by augmenting the existing standards for education, training and experience, and adding new dimensions in leadership skills and participation in professional activities.

Hence, employees may stay current and earn their 80 points in a variety of ways by engaging in formal and informal learning, and experiential and professional activities, including:

- participating in training and conferences focusing on acquisition reform subjects and emerging acquisition policies and practices;
- taking cross-training in other acquisition specialties or higher levels of certification training in their own career fields to broaden and expand their competencies;
- engaging in training addressing one or more of the leadership competencies identified in the OPM Leadership Effectiveness Inventory;
- enrolling in undergraduate and graduate level courses in the scientific, technical or business disciplines underpinning acquisition fields;
- engaging in experiential learning, and rotational and developmental assignments to practice new skills or gain multi-functional experience;
- participating in professional activities such as teaching, speaking, publishing or pursuing professional certifications or licenses, and
- maintaining active membership in professional organizations related to acquisition fields.

Developmental guides have been designed for each career field to serve as a roadmap for employees to follow in tailoring and individualizing their activities. Personnel can use these guides to plan learning activities that are both congruent with the education, training and experience enhancements recommended at appropriate stages of career progression, as well as supportive of their own career goals.

Finally, policy guidelines for awarding point credits help the employee and supervisor determine the value of activities undertaken and convert disparate crediting schemes, such as academic credit, continuing education units and other types of measures, into a common point system for crediting employee participation. When they earn a minimum of 80 points, acquisition personnel will receive a Continuous Learning Certification, valid for two years, which is to be renewed on a biennial basis.